

Rural Non-Congregate Summer Meal Programs: Understanding the Caregiver Experience

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2023, school districts located in rural areas were presented with the opportunity to implement non-congregate summer meal service offerings in order to support children under 18 in accessing nutritional meals during summer break. This was made possible by President Biden's endorsement of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, which authorized a permanent, non-congregate summer meal service for rural areas.

Share Our Strength is interested in understanding the impact of the meal service on participants, and identifying ways to continue to implement the meal service in order to best meet participant needs and provide expanded access to nutritional meals throughout the summer. This report offers an understanding of the participant experience of the meal service based on participant interviews and site visits to three school districts with rural schools in Arizona, Georgia, and California. A synthesis of insights derived from interviews with Food Service Directors (FSDs) and participants is provided.

In this report, the term "participants" refers to the caregivers who collect or receive meals on behalf of the children who then consume them. This diverse group encompasses parents, grandparents, family members, and friends picking

up meals for their own children as well as those of others. Their lived experiences vary widely, spanning from grandparents providing childcare while parents work, to single parents navigating day-to-day activities and childcare, to individuals with disabilities caring for children at home, to networks of friends coordinating meal pick-ups for their own and neighboring children, to caregivers seeking activities for their children during the summer. The non-congregate summer meals service supports a wide spectrum of participant needs. As one participant stated, "This program has been a tremendous boon for me. As a retired grandmother babysitting pro bono, every bit of support counts!" Another participant shared, "I am battling cancer, enduring pain throughout my body, and my daughter has Down Syndrome, so having the lunches delivered to us is an absolute godsend." Lastly, a participant shared, "It (summer meals) eases the burden for me as a mother of an almost 3-year-old and an 8-month-old, not having to worry about what my 3-year-old will eat."

Summer signifies a break in the academic calendar, bringing opportunities for recreation, exploration, and warm weather activities. Additionally, it brings a shift in routines. Responsibilities supported by the school district during the school year - including school bus transportation, the structured academic day, school-provided meals, and after-school programs - now fall on caregivers.

This responsibility persists regardless of the caregiver’s capacity to take time off from work or the resources available to them. Thus, summer meals act as a crucial resource during the summer months to support caregivers. The Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas recognizes the challenges faced by caregivers in rural communities and offers participants various ways to access meals that support the diverse needs of the community during summer months. The current meal service guidance grants states the latitude to determine how various aspects of the meal service are administered at the local level, leading to significant variation in meal service structures from state to state.

In July 2023, the Share Our Strength Innovation Team collaborated with Angela McKee Brown of Project Reflect to dive deeper into how and why caregivers utilized the offerings provided by the Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas option. Angela embarked on visits to rural communities in Georgia, Arizona, and California to observe how the meal service was implemented, document best practices, and engage participants in conversations about their experiences with the non-congregate summer meal service. The site visits focused on three primary modes of food distribution:

- Home Delivery of meal bags containing 10 meals (comprising 5 lunches and 5 breakfasts).
- Mobile Meals hosted at multiple locations with meal bags containing 10 meals (comprising 5 lunches and 5 breakfasts).
- Grab-and-Go meals at multiple locations with single meals or meals for one day (1 breakfast or 1 lunch; 1 breakfast and 1 lunch).

All meal services included fresh milk.

Interview Process

Over a two-week period, 30 caregivers were interviewed about their experiences with the 2023 non-congregate summer meal service, giving them the opportunity to provide insights, ideas and feedback. The participants responded to questions related to accessibility, satisfaction with the food provided, communication about the service, distribution of meals, and

recommendations for service enhancement. An additional 10 caregivers participated in a survey regarding their experiences. All participants received compensation for their contributions and feedback. The participant conversations yielded numerous recommendations and insights into the non-congregate meal service.

PARTICIPANT INSIGHTS

Thirty participants were interviewed in order to understand their experience with the rural non-congregate summer meal service provided in their community. The quotes are grouped based on themes that were expressed during the interview process.

Universal Financial Relief

The meal service eases the financial burden for families over the summer, offering substantial relief. Families can plan their budgets with confidence, knowing that the financial strain of purchasing groceries—that otherwise may not have been purchased during the school year due to availability of free and reduced price meals at school—is alleviated. In addition, the meals support families that are experiencing the effects of wages and federal food benefits not increasing at the same rate that the cost of food is increasing.

“I’m a single mom. My sister is a single mom. I make too much gross to qualify for access to food stamps and help. My little sister gets them, food stamps and WIC, but even still, it’s not enough. So this (the summer meals service) is really helpful to help bridge that gap for her and it’s provided something for me throughout the summer so I don’t have to worry as much about, ok what are we going to do planning meals, because it is already done for me... As a single mom, this has improved stuff during the summer for us. How we go about budgeting, planning, being able to put more money away.”

Sally, Arizona

A participant shared that she appreciates the meal service because it eases the strain on her grocery budget, providing essential financial

support for her family. Having recently moved from a more affluent neighborhood, where few children qualified for free meals, she initially never anticipated participating. However, circumstances have changed, and now she finds herself in need. As she shared, “Truthfully, it’s hard (to participate) because I know that we are here for the financial component to it. I’ve shared with other people about the fact that we participate with this or even during the school year...So, it’s not that I’m ashamed of any of that, it’s just not something I’m always broadcasting, I guess. I share with particular friends or, you know, the people I kinda trust to know that that’s where we are at. We’re just coming at it from a this is a financial benefit and might as well take advantage of something that is one less thing that I have to provide for outside of that.”

Jen, Arizona

One caregiver shared that she and her husband are now responsible for her grandchildren, but her husband, who is disabled, has very limited mobility. As she shared, “The food has been helpful. It has been really helpful. Without it... I’m actually getting teary eyed. Without it, we wouldn’t be able to feed them during the summer. Honestly. It’s a huge help and if they took it away, I don’t know what we would do. I have a husband that is disabled and has been disabled for a year now. Actually, it’s been two years now, and I’m his caregiver and wife. And we are raising grandchildren now and we just adopted our youngest grandson, and because we have adopted him, we get no help from the parents at all. ... I don’t know how they are doing things, but it sure seems like groceries keep going up, but the food stamps don’t change. And it just seems like it gets harder and harder to provide.”

Linda, Arizona

A participant who is a single mother and is having financially difficult times shared, “I have been struggling financially recently, so having somebody else be able to help provide some food for my child was nice. I actually went

all last week without having milk, so it was very convenient to be able to go to her and get a little thing of milk for my kiddo.” She expressed, “That was something else that I appreciated. There was no age restriction. My daughter is only three and I know because of her birthday she is not going to be able to go into school for another year or two years.”

Nora, Arizona

Accessibility and Mobility Requirements

Participation in congregate meal services requires proximity to a meal location or the ability to drive due to limited public transportation in rural communities. In addition, infrastructure, such as sidewalks, is limited or not present to allow for a safe walking experience. For individuals with disabilities or limited mobility, accessing meal sites can be challenging. Home Delivery is necessary for those who cannot physically make it to the designated locations or have other constraints such as needing to work or are unavailable during the pick up windows. The Mobile Meals and Grab-and-Go service models also significantly reduced barriers by providing multiple access points within communities when the local schools are not in session during the summer months.

Providing multiple meals at once emerged as the most valuable service feature for families. This not only supported access to nutrition but also enabled meal planning for the week. Multiple meals also streamlined service accessibility, freeing families from the need to make multiple trips to a pick up location each day or week, a drive that could take upwards of thirty minutes one way in rural areas. Additionally, allowing participants to pick up for other participants, thus leveraging the mutual support norms of the community, greatly reduced barriers to accessing the program. The non-congregate meal service provides increased access to meals and takes into account the broad and diverse needs and circumstances of recipients. The service significantly reduced barriers to access for families and substantially increased participation in summer meals, thus ensuring more children were being provided healthy meals throughout the summer.

One participant was a grandmother with 9 grandchildren that she picked up meals for. She picks up the meals and delivers them to her children's homes for her grandchildren to eat. She does this because her one son with four children is disabled and can no longer use his right arm and needs help. The meals are an easy way for him to be able to stay at home and take care of the kids and be able to feed them. It is easy for him to put the food in the microwave. As she shared, "My son has been in a motorcycle accident and has no use of his right arm. And he just had another surgery two days before school got out. So we knew it was going to be difficult for him. One, being at home with the kids. His wife was pregnant. She had her baby on June 12th, which was two weeks after school got out. So to me, and to them as well, it made sense for that extra little bit of help with both of them out of work, financially it made sense. And then, you know, just having that easy access was very very helpful."

Deedee, Georgia

A caregiver who was an older woman that walked slowly with a cane shared that her legs can often hurt her, and that is one reason why she appreciates the summer meals. She shared that when her legs are hurting at home, she is able to have her grandchildren go to the fridge and get one of the items that doesn't need to be heated up, and that is helpful. As she shared, "It helps me out. I don't have to be trying to look for something for them to eat. A lot of times, my legs be hurting me so bad I can't do nothing for them. So, if they can go to the refrigerator and get it themselves, that's good. If it's something I have to warm up for them, I can do that. But not all the time. I may not have to do it all. Because some of the foods in there, they can just go to the refrigerator and get it and eat it themselves."

Liz, Georgia

A caregiver shared that her brother is not able to get the food because he works at a plant and isn't able to get to the pick up during the short window of time that they have, and

that's why she picks up for him. "I ended up picking up the meals for my two nieces because the time was only like a fifteen minute window. So, I would actually have to go ahead (and pick them up). He would call in for their meal and make them aware that I was going to pick up and then I just started calling in for him because he couldn't always get to the phone because he works at a plant and you can't have your phone out to make the call."

Brianna, Georgia

A caregiver shared that she found out about the service because she kept seeing the meal van, prompting her to visit the district website to find out the dates and times so she could pick up meals for 5 children, three of which are hers and two are her younger siblings. They have participated in the meal service before, and her grandmother would take the kids to a school site to collect the meals. When asked about her preference between the two types of meal service offerings her family has experienced, she shared, "I would say, I like this one a lot better (grab-and-go) but also, at the schools they would hand out jugs of milk. These are more individualized school breakfasts and lunches. At the schools, they would give out basically like groceries. Like, gallons of milk and stuff like that." She appreciates the proximity to be able to walk and pick up meals, but she also liked getting things in volume or bulk versus individualized meals.

May, California

"Delivery would be helpful. I didn't find out until after the sign-up period had ended. My other sister had told me, but it was too late when I looked into it. Because she gets her meals delivered. That would be immensely helpful. Saving money on gas driving out here. I live on the far side of town (name removed), so it's about a 25 minute drive each way. And then not having to rely on my little sister to help get my daughter ready. Because I do it (pick up food) early in the mornings before I

go to work.” Her job with the county provides her with some flexibility, allowing her to pick up the meals on Mondays. However, a delivery option would not only help save on fuel costs but also afford her more quality time with her daughter on Mondays before she begins work.

Sally, Arizona

Perceptions and Stigmas

A great deal of attention is paid to reducing the stigma that students may feel when participating in school meals. As the interviews show, adults can also feel stigma when accessing summer meals for their children. Some worry about being viewed negatively for seeking support, and there is a fear of potentially taking resources from someone in greater need. Challenging these misconceptions and providing ample information is crucial to ensuring caregivers feel comfortable and welcomed when accessing meals for their children.

The summer meal service is inclusive in its approach, offering access to any child under 18 years old, regardless of income status. This accessibility is crucial, as interviews reveal a diverse range of reasons why families and caregivers benefit from the service. The non-congregate summer meal service addresses a broader spectrum of community needs, and the service can also provide much needed support for those grappling with economic instability due to factors like wage stagnation, rising costs, and reductions in federal benefits.

Summer meals present a significant opportunity to connect the community to the school meal program, highlighting the quality of food provided and the dedication of the dining team. The meal service emphasizes community support, shifting the narrative away from income eligibility.

When asked about what she would share with others about the service, she said, “The food is good and it’s free. I’m not sure they all know that. I don’t know if it’s being widely used. I’m retired and I have these four little boys and that was quite the blessing to have an extra amount of food. It was very much a blessing.

It was so easy. I expected it to be harder and that they would have to check my name off or do a million other things but they gave me food. They wanted to see if I really had kids, but that’s ok because they were in my car. I would tell everyone to go. Lots of options for pick up.” She also shared that, “They are so nice and I just drove through and showed I had kids and they don’t push any buttons. They don’t make you feel embarrassed.”

Gwen, California

A caregiver shared that she was worried that people who were providing the meals would look down on her for taking them, but they are actually really kind. As she shared, “They are very nice. Instead of somebody looking down at me for coming to get the meals.”

Nancy, Georgia

A caregiver shared that she has already provided information about the service with family members (she “tells everyone”) and if she were to recommend it to someone not participating, she would say, “It’s definitely worth it, you have nothing to lose. It’s good food, especially if you need it. Plus, I have no problems with the quality of the food. It’s not like, you know when you get free things and people think it’s trash. Like, oh it’s free so it must be of, like, low quality. They really don’t care. No, they actually put some thought into these meals.”

May, California

She feels cared for by the meal service and that means a lot to her and her willingness to participate because “no one is looking at you the wrong way.”

Ms. Smith, Georgia

Familiar Foods Have Multiple Benefits

The meal service offers access to a variety of foods during the summer, providing families with easy to serve meal options they can trust are healthy. This not only allows caregivers more quality time with their children but also reduces time spent meal planning and grocery shopping during the week. Additionally, providing 'fan favorite' items that have been enjoyed throughout the school year gives children familiar and enjoyable options.

For younger children who have not yet started school, the meals serve as a learning opportunity and can prepare them for the mealtime experience during the school year. For instance, they learn how to open milk cartons and can try the food they will be served in the cafeteria. The meals help them transition into a new environment with many new experiences. Ultimately, the summer meals serve as a bridge, turning the school year's meals into a comforting connection to home.

Lastly, receiving multiple meals at once proved immensely beneficial for families who value being able to choose what's served each day. This enables them to better support their children's needs and ensures that the provided items are consumed. Throughout the interview process, it was evident that there is minimal to no food wasted, and children are happily consuming what is provided.

A caregiver shared, "My daughter is getting ready to go to pre-kindergarten. She is going to be eating a lot of these foods and doing all of these things, and I thought that it was a great way to start introducing the changes that are going to be coming...Introducing her to the food now, my hope was that it might help comfort her when she starts pre-kindergarten, being away from home and big changes because it will be familiar."

Sally, Arizona

A caregiver shared that she appreciated the flexibility of being able to take the meals home, allowing her to serve them in different ways to her children. She shared, "I'm just so grateful that it exists (the program)...I'm glad that we

didn't have to go eat at the locations because being in the summer, not everyone is always hungry at the same time. Not everybody always wants to eat the same things. So, sometimes they have the little cheeseburger sliders, well this one next to me doesn't eat those. She loves the grilled cheese sandwiches. And the one next to her loves the sliders, so, she will probably eat all the grilled cheese sandwiches and she will eat all the sliders. It's kinda nice that we can take them home because then we can use them as we need them. And everybody gets to eat what they like where as if we were at the location one of them would probably be like, you know what, that isn't my favorite so I'm not going to eat that today. So, I actually love that we can pick it up and take it home and eat it as we need it."

Mary, Arizona

A caregiver shared that she appreciates being able to get the meals because her daughter works two jobs and is going to school to become an x-ray technician. The summer meals allow the caregiver to not need to go to the grocery store and try to figure out meals that the grandchildren will eat. As she shared, "My seven year old, he is on the autistic scale and he is very picky about his food. But, since he been going to school, he love the school food. And he eats it. He eats it so much better. Because some time, we cook dinner and he don't want nothing but the rice. So you know, this food, he'll eat it."

Lizz, Georgia

One participant shared that she appreciates that her daughter has choices of what to eat because she knows that she will eat what she picks out that day. Her daughter knows to get a main, a vegetable, fruit, and a juice. As she shared, "It may be a chicken burger, like the chicken patty burger, or the beef burger or a corn dog or mozzarella sticks, or the pizza. And it was really like, you just tell me what you want and I'll go from there and prepare it. It was more so about giving you a choice versus when you go to school and the school lunch is the option that you have. When you get all

the school meals, you can pick whatever you want today out and then I'll prepare it. It was a choice of a healthy meal."

Brianna, Georgia

A caregiver shared that she picks up breakfast with her daughter but skips lunch because of her work schedule. As she shared, "My kiddo loves her apple and/or orange in the morning and I did like that sometimes she (dining staff) brought pears and cherries. So that was something new for my kiddo to try because I'm not really a fruit eater and I'm trying to get her to eat more fruits so that was nice. And she really did enjoy the cherries, so that was cool. I'm starting to have to buy cherries now."

Nora, California

The food options allow her family to try new things they wouldn't normally buy/find at the local Walmart, providing her kids with variety. As Susie shared, "It is cool to have something different than what you would have normally bought."

Susie, Arizona

A caregiver shared that she really appreciated having the meals because it provided her convenience of not having to figure out what "you are going to give those babies for their lunch and breakfast every day." Everything is ready, and you can just grab and go. You don't have to cook while it is really hot outside.

Mae, Georgia

Uplifts the mutual support present in rural communities

Many of the caregivers that were spoken to mentioned that members of their community were willing to help each other out and support each other with necessary tasks.

"Go down there and check it out. If you like it - fine, if not, tell somebody that might be able

to utilize the program for their kids. Some of the people I know don't have transportation and I would be willing to take the kids down there to help them out."

Chad, California

In previous years, it was much easier because you could pick up for other kids. She shared, "That is the one thing that did bother me more. Because there are some parents that actually don't even have cars to go pick up free lunch for their kids. And so that's why the majority of people were actually going and picking up lunches for other families because of that. Ok, and so if my nieces and nephews were with me at my house but they didn't go with me for the ride or when you're babysitting you get extra lunches, but if you didn't have them in the car, you can't get them. Especially in town (name changed) right now, a majority of people don't have cars, so ok can you grab me two lunches on your way when you go get your other kids (meals) because they don't have a car, or are at work, or it's so hot outside. So it's like, ok, no problem."

Diane, California

Keeping things simple and consistent supports participation

Though the guidelines of the summer non-congregate meal service are navigated by school districts administering the service, the impact of a complicated, guideline intensive service can be felt by participants who are unaware of the 'rules' until they inadvertently break them. Additionally, shifts in the guidelines and service structure can lead to uncertainty among participants, causing them to question whether the service is permanent or temporary.

A consistent and straightforward meal service would afford both school districts and participants the ability to plan more effectively. This, in turn, would lead to streamlined operations that draw on the insights gained from previous school years. It would also provide participants with a stable and clear understanding of what is available, how

the meal service can be accessed and where. If there are specific rules associated with the service, such as the requirement for children to be present at meal pick ups, it would be beneficial to communicate these details to participants in advance of the service.

Consistency allows for participation habits to be cultivated and for school meal operations to be optimized. The more that this can be supported through the guidelines, the greater the benefit for communities and school districts.

At the end of the conversation, I asked her if she would change anything about the meal service and she mentioned the delivery service for those in need, and then she added that she hopes this meal service will exist next year. As she shared, “I hope they continue it (the meal service) for me. The way it is, continue it for me. Like I said, it’s good for me. I thank them. Everytime I go by there I tell them thank you, because I appreciate it and I want them to know I thank them.”

Lizz, Georgia

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are recommendations inspired by the feedback and ideas shared by caregivers who participated in the rural non-congregate summer meals service provided by school districts in Arizona, Georgia, and California during the summer of 2023.

Operations

Offer Multiple Meal Pick Up And Home Delivery As Distribution Options

Participants celebrated receiving multiple meals at once, finding it to be the most convenient and accessible aspect of the summer meals service. Home delivery emerged as the optimal method of access, enabling families and caregivers to participate regardless of existing constraints that would otherwise inhibit participation such

as access to reliable transportation, a disability, needing to work, or scheduling conflicts (doctors appointments, napping children, etc).

Additional Equipment is Necessary

The meal operations that provided multiple meals at once required a substantial amount of food storage space. This necessitated the use of large cold storage units such as walk-in freezers and refrigerators. When delivering food, a considerable number of coolers and thermal bags were needed. Access to refrigerated trucks would have greatly optimized the mobile meal service. Additionally, vacuum sealers would allow for the districts to have greater flexibility in the foods they provide.

Supports Staff Retention

Higher participation meant more consistent work hours for dining staff because of the increased labor needed for meal preparation and delivery. For one food service director, this translated into greater staff retention, as his team did not need to seek additional employment during the summer months, which could potentially draw them away from the school district. Providing stable, well-paying jobs for most of the year supported his ability to retain his talented team.

Meal Options

Multiple Meals Provided

Participants emphasized that having multiple meals provided at once allowed for greater choice and, subsequently, increased food consumption by their children. The availability of a variety of food items enabled caregivers to support their children’s dietary and food preferences and swap items among siblings, especially if a child had a specific preference or need. This flexibility ensured that children had access to meals that met their needs every day instead of going without when relying on single menu items provided daily at congregate feeding school sites.

Keep it Familiar

Offering familiar foods and “fan favorites” from the school year during the summer brings joy to children, as they recognize their favorite foods. Additionally, it helps prepare new students for

the meal experience when they begin school. Caregivers cited that it helped them prepare their younger children for how to open packaging and milk cartons. It also helps to provide a familiar experience for the child when starting school for the first time and many things will be unfamiliar.

Outreach and Communications

Being Intentional About Reaching Impoverished Neighborhoods

Some impoverished neighborhoods may face additional challenges, such as broken infrastructure, substandard housing conditions, and limited access to resources. Initiatives to reach these communities, even if it involves creative approaches like home deliveries or door to door communication about the service, can make a significant impact in ensuring that children receive the support they need.

Communicating with Caregivers

Participants expressed gratitude for the information provided by their school districts, primarily through fliers detailing the service offerings. While fliers were viewed as an effective method of communication, many participants also expressed a preference for receiving phone calls or text messages about the service. In addition, if there are specific rules associated with the service, such as children need to be present when receiving meals, it should be expressed on the communication resource.

Promote Abundance

Participants expressed concerns about taking food from others who might need it more. This sentiment contrasts sharply with the ample food resources available through the school districts. Improved communication highlighting the service's broader benefits, such as its support for families, job creation for food service staff, and reimbursements for the school district, would reinforce the idea that participation ensures the community has access to this valuable service. Efforts need to be made to dispel the misconception that participation might limit access for others - instead greater participation supports access for others by allowing for service continuation.

Additionally, participants often called the nutrition department to learn more about the meals. The person answering calls plays a vital role in welcoming people to the meal service and also providing helpful information that supports participation.

Be Welcoming and Kind

Several parents expressed nervousness about being stigmatized and treated in a demeaning way for taking the meals. Dining staff who distribute the meals and staff answering phone calls can play a pivotal role in ensuring that people feel supported and respected when participating in the meal service.

Additional Activities are Welcomed

Offering access to supplementary activities and resources could attract more participants. Suggestions included locating pick up sites near parks, organizing festivals or fairs at the start and end of the program to create a celebratory atmosphere and distribute school supplies, providing occasional educational sessions on health and wellness during meal pick-ups, and making books available to participants through partnerships with the local library.

Allowing For Non-Family Pick Up Is Crucial

Allowing individuals to pick up meals for children who are not their own supports rural communities' network of mutual support. This also recognizes that not everyone has access to transportation or can easily access meals at distribution times due to constraints such as needing to work or disabilities that inhibit mobility. In addition, not having to have a child present in order to receive a meal would support caregivers in being able to pick up meals for children in their community.

Policy

Provide Consistency

Many participants interviewed would use the phrase, "If this exists next year..." when talking about the meal service. Much like school year meals are understood as a consistent resource for families, having a summer service that is clearly defined and understood as consistent would allow

for families to better prepare for the summer months in terms of budgets, planning, and scheduling.

Expanding “Rural”

The criteria used to classify a school site as ‘rural’ should be made more explicit. This transparency would enable increased feedback from food service directors regarding the site selection process. Feedback from the directors could yield insights into alternative factors that might serve as more accurate indicators of the need for non-congregate meal service. Leveraging the knowledge and expertise of Food Service Directors in the design of the site selection process could lead to the creation of guidelines that broaden meal access for more children during the summer months.

Equipment and Supply Grants

Provide grants to support equipment and supplies, particularly for summer meal services operating at scale. Key equipment needs include, but are not limited to, walk-in freezers and refrigerators, coolers, thermal bags, vacuum sealers and refrigerated trucks.

Consistent Service Rules Across States

Clarifying what aspects of the meal service are consistent across states would allow for more efficient national training and sharing of best practices, ultimately optimizing service delivery.

CONCLUSION

The summer non-congregate meal service is an important resource for rural communities and it supports caregivers in providing healthy meals to children during the summer break. The findings and recommendations provided in this report offer insights for optimizing service delivery, ensuring as many children as possible have access to healthy meals throughout the summer.

Thirty participants were interviewed across three school districts in Arizona, Georgia and California. In all 30 interviews, participants consistently expressed gratitude and appreciation for the non-congregate meal service. The community readily acknowledges the dedication of the dining service teams and the care that is being provided with each meal. The meal service is having a meaningful impact on the lives of both children and their caregivers.

The Summer 2023 Non-Congregate Meal Service in Rural Areas offering has demonstrated effectiveness in reaching significantly more children in rural communities. The service takes into account the diverse experiences and needs of families, and provides relevant and useful support during the summer months. Expanding this meal service will ensure even more children are fed in a meaningful, dignified, and caring way during the summer months - allowing for joyful summer memories filled with healthy school meals.